

Support for HB 351

~~January 31, 2011~~

February 1, 2011

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Joint Appropriations Subcommittee on Long-Range Planning,

I am Maureen Connor and I am representing the Granite County Board of Commissioners. Granite County is a class 5 county roughly in western Montana. Philipsburg is the County Seat.

Granite County is mountainous, and fortunate to have three major river valleys, a portion of the Upper Clark Fork River, Flint Creek, and Rock Creek. All this water is a good thing, supporting our agricultural base, and providing ample recreation for our neighbors.

All that water also means we have 38 bridges (maybe more, there's a few we fight about still) under County responsibility. In 2007 we had a high spring flow event on Flint Creek, prompting me to become very interested in developing a plan for bridge replacement.

Once we got over the sticker shock on bridge replacement, the County put in for a TSEP planning/engineering grant, matching the 15K award with 15K of County funds. That was the first hurdle, convincing the board and constituents that we needed to use engineering services to prove to the State that any grant award money in the future would be used wisely.

That grant turned into a CIP, showing we have 8 bridges in need of replacement. We picked 3 to work on through TSEP, deliberately selecting ones close together to save on engineering costs.

One of the next steps was acquiring matching funds sufficient for a realistic TSEP application, a process well known to be extremely competitive. We agreed to use the County bridge fund for 3 years for this project, as well as county crews and equipment where feasible/qualified.

I wrote an application for 65K to the Tri-County RAC, for Title II SRS federal funding for lost timber revenues to forested counties. That grant was awarded.

Our Board attended a TSEP workshop to learn more about just how competitive the process was, to help us with our non-technical part of the application.

The completed TSEP application arrived in Helena in April of 2010. We knew we wouldn't be number one on the list, because of our smaller population and travel patterns, but we thought we'd done the best we could, in this long 3 year process.

The purpose of bridge replacement is public safety. Two of our bridges are on a regular school bus routes, the county's highest priority. Two are old and narrow, and have prevented logging sales up in the mountains by their undersized and aged nature. These bridges serve residential populations, recreational lands, and federal lands that have potential for timber harvest and mining.

The County has been very specific with our contracted engineers; we want the projects to be able to be bid by qualified local contractors. I can't say that these projects would create new jobs, but in a County with at least 11% unemployment, keeping people working is important to us.

I was quite surprised to learn in late 2010 that the TSEP trust program was not as I thought—a highly competitive grants program in existence since 1992 or 1993.

I appreciated Senator Brown's questions yesterday regarding the work that has gone into these projects, and his wondering what delay of a legislative cycle means. It's not good. My RAC money was approved specifically as a match to TSEP. I don't know what they are going to think about a partial project.

I heard enough about wastewater yesterday to do me for a while, but one of the things I noticed was how small nearly all of the applicants are, and how big the need. I'd like to make it clear that for us little people even being at your hearing with a project on the table is a really big deal, huge local effort, and years of time.

You have a very difficult job with the State budget this year, and some of us know it. I feel sure after sitting in your hearing room several times this session that you will do the best you can for Montana.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Maureen Connor". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name and contact information.

Maureen Connor
Granite County Commissioner, speaking for the Board
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